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Peruvian President Faces Questions for 1986 Killings at El Fronton Prison

by LADB Staff

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Peru’s President Alan Garcia has again faced questions as the country's highest court continues a judicial investigation into the killings of dozens of prisoners at El Fronton island prison during Garcia's first term as president (1985-1990).

The court ordered the investigation in 2004 in an effort to determine responsibility for the incident in which more than 118 suspected leftist guerrillas died at El Fronton when marines were sent to put down their uprising. Garcia denies political responsibility for the killings, but lawyers for victims' families say they have evidence that Garcia ordered the massacre.

The killings happened when security forces stormed the maximum-security prison near Lima during a riot on July 19, 1986 (see Notisur, 2003-09-12). The armed forces took control of the prison, but afterward numerous extrajudicial killings and other excesses were documented, according to Lima newspaper El Comercio.

Garcia and the nation then faced a brutal conflict with the Maoist rebel group Sendero Luminoso. Garcia, elected president for a second time in July 2006 (see Notisur, 2006-06-16), has already been cleared of any wrongdoing.

Garcia a witness, not the accused

Garcia, appearing as a witness, told a hearing on Feb. 9 that he did not have any knowledge of the operation at the time. Judge Maria Leon Yarango invited Garcia to testify as a witness, not as an accused person. "I think it's an issue that is almost 21 years old and about which I have already testified 19 times and for which I have been exonerated numerous times," he told journalists after his testimony.

A lawyer for the victims' families, Carlos Rivera, said evidence showed that political and legal responsibility for the inmates' deaths lay with Garcia and other top officials. He says the investigation has revealed contradictions that, "from my point of view, are unresolvable." And, some of the military chiefs involved in the operation say the president received regular updates on the events at the prison.

The incident was not only considered tragic but also as a black mark on the relatively new government of Garcia. The country was hosting a meeting of more than twenty heads of state at a summit of the Socialist International that day.

Ex-cabinet member denies having radio during killing

A leader in Garcia's Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) and close friend of Garcia, Augustin Mantilla, then serving as vice minister of the interior, was the top government
representative at El Fronton. He testified to Judge Leon on Feb. 27 that he arrived at the prison not on Garcia's orders but at the request of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Consejo por la Paz.

Mantilla denied receiving any orders from Garcia during the incident and also denied giving any instructions during the operations under the joint command of the armed forces. He said he did not have a radio with him and therefore did not hold any radio conversation with anyone, contradicting witnesses who said they saw Mantilla with radio equipment speaking with someone that they suspected was the president.

The testimony against Mantilla has been a central point of human rights organizations' suspicions that Garcia held command responsibility for the killings. Some prisoners who survived by hiding in trenches on the island now testify that Mantilla shared command with the military, among them then Navy Capt. Luis Giampetri, today a retired vice admiral and first vice president of Peru. Giampetri has rejected accusations against the military actions at El Fronton, calling them "unjust persecution against uniformed men who fulfilled their patriotic duty to respond to the armed aggression of terrorist subversion."

Mantilla was expelled from the party after it was revealed that he was taking money from Vladimiro Montesinos, the intelligence chief of authoritarian ex-President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). He had faced earlier human rights abuse accusations late in Garcia's first term (see Chronicle, 1989-08-22). Fujimori-era killings at El Fronton also questioned Garcia has also come under criticism from human rights groups for rejecting the findings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights Court (IACHR) regarding 1992 killings at El Fronton during Fujimori's administration.

Human Rights Watch director Jose Miguel Vivanco said that the Peruvian government was showing "an objectionable attitude" toward an IACHR finding that ordered that the families of 41 guerrillas killed at the prison be indemnified and given recognition. "What the government of President Garcia has done is begin to scrutinize, discuss, and question the validity of the finding, to use nationalist arguments," said Vivanco. "This and much worse we expected from Fujimori and other Latin American rulers, but not a government like Peru's." During a military incursion into the prison in 1992, Fujimori ordered the killing of rebels who were conducting indoctrination in the prisons, says the IACHR. [Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 10/08/06, 10/10/06; www.bbcmundo.com, 02/09/07; BBC News, 02/10/07; El Comercio (Peru), 02/17/07, 02/27/07, 03/07/07]